



Statement of Selam Kidane, PhD

Traumatisation as a Weapon of War

European Parliament Roundtable on Eritrea

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I would like to thank MEP Langensiepen and the European External Programme with Africa for inviting me to speak here today.

All protocol observed.

On my journey to work yesterday I was listening to a news coverage and reflecting on the devastation that the current war in the Gaza Strip is causing, then I heard an interviewee state, something that resonated: in conflicts of the past it had always been ‘women and children first... for rescue women and children first on trains and boats out of conflict zones, women and children first for food aid and medication etc etc, but now the woman was explaining that the devastation of this conflict seemed to be targeting women and children first... there are reports of rape, of hunger and thirst, difficulties in evacuation or sheltering that seem to devastate the most vulnerable first.

Of course, some of these difficulties are consequences rather than a deliberate acts but some aren't, those of us who have been observing the war in Tigray have come to the painful realisation that heinous rapes and sexual violence were used deliberately to inculcate the terrorization and traumatisation of an entire nation. As were the massacres that targeted people who

had attempted to access their sacred sanctuaries their places of worship.

Community elders, priests, sheiks, and other religious leaders were targeted to show that nothing was sacred, no one was immune and nowhere was safe causing the probable traumatising of an entire nation whether or not the nationals were located in the vicinity. In addition to the devastation, it has caused the individual victims.

Other contexts of political violence are not different in their approach or its effect either; the UN Human Rights Commission report in 2016 and the reports of the special rapporteur since are full of evidence of the fact that the Eritrean government has maintained its brutal rule over the nation the entire nation through the instilling of very deep fear that has left Eritreans no option but to flee their country in their droves risking their very lives.

The problem with this level of trauma at both the individual and the collective level is the fact that the painful memory is then locked in the individual as well as the collective... making the pain and anger associated with it potent affecting the individual or the community from moving forward into the future. People become stuck and hostages of the past communities live in limbo and are unable to attain healing and all the advantages that come with that.

In this frozen mode they wait ready to fight back next time or ready for a flight in the event of a next time... the difficulty is that their hyper alert mode means that their assessment of next time is affected and hence the fight-flight can be triggered erroneously including by people who would benefit from their fight or flight (e.g. a war mongering political system and a human trafficker respectively). By consequence those wanting to move the individual forward (e.g. peace building or development aid) would fail due to the mismatch in mentality or mode of thinking.

Unfortunately, trauma support at an individual level or worse still at the collective level isn't always prioritised in emergency or post conflict contexts and this hampers peacebuilding and post conflict development. People need to heal and communities need to recover before they can appreciate the benefits of peacebuilding and development and partake in these activities. Without such healing their systems will be on the alert to either fight in the next conflict or flee even the remotest chance of the next conflict.

It is in our interest (globally) to prioritise trauma healing and recovery during our considerations of post conflict contexts.

Thank you.